

THE USE OF THE BOW

NO. 1694

A SERMON
DELIVERED AT THE THURSDAY EVENING LECTURE,
BY C. H. SPURGEON,
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son:
(Also he bade them teach the children of Judah the use of the bow:
behold, it is written in the book of Jasher).”
2 Samuel 1:17, 18.*

THE translators have acted very properly in inserting the words, “the use of,” for that is what the passage means, but if you read it without those words the sense is still the same—“He bade them teach the children of Judah the bow,” that is to say, how to use the bow.

In modern times, critics have said that by the expression “the bow” is meant the song which David composed, and to sustain their notion—they quote from the Koran of Mohammed, in which they tell us that there is a certain chapter called “the Cow,” and therefore David called his song “the bow,” as if so late an instance of oriental usage was at all to the point. I declare that there is nothing whatever in Scripture to justify the statement that the words, “the bow,” can be applied to David’s lament. No doubt some of the Psalms have titles given to them, but there is never an instance of a psalm being quoted by its title. It is quoted by its number, never by its name. I accept the passage as our learned translators understood it—David bade them teach the children of Judah the bow. If any inquire, “What then is the connection? Why should David teach the people the use of the bow because Saul and Jonathan were slain? Why is the military order concerning the use of a certain instrument of war inserted here, when the passage is full of lamentation?” I answer—most fitly, as I shall have to show you. It was the best memorial of that skillful archer Jonathan, and of the other princes who had fallen by the arrows of the Philistines, that from the disastrous day of their slaughter David caused his own tribe, over which he had chief power, to be trained in the use of that special weapon of war.

I. But now to our work. From my text I want to gather a few useful lessons. And the first is this—**ACTIVITY IS A VALUABLE SOLACE FOR SORROW.** The people were very grieved, for Saul and Jonathan, the king and the crown prince, were slain. David indulges their grief. He writes them a plaintive song which the daughters of Israel may sing. But to take their minds off their distress, he at the same time issues the order to teach the children of Judah the use of the bow, for activity is an effectual remedy in the time of sorrow. Certainly the opposite of it would tend towards blank despair. Are any of you in great grief? Have you suffered a supreme loss? Do not be tempted to brood over your affliction, and to think that you ought to be excused from further service. Do not shut yourself up to meditate upon the great ill that has befallen you, so as to nurse your wrath against God. This can do you no good whatever. Rather imitate David, who, when his child was sick, fasted and prayed, but when it was dead, went into the house and ate bread, for he said, “Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”

I beseech you do not fall under the temptation of Satan to cease from your daily activity, and especially from any holy service in which you are engaged for Christ. It may be that your sorrow is not a bereavement, but disappointment in your work. You have not won those souls that you looked to win, and some that you thought were converted have gone back. And now Satan tempts you to do no more—never to cast the net again, for you have toiled all night and taken nothing—never to sow again, for you have wasted your seed by the highway, and birds have devoured it. This is a suggestion of the evil one. It will lead you into deeper anguish. I would say to you, O mourner, get up from the couch of ease! Shake yourself from the dust, O virgin daughter of Zion! Sit not down upon the dunghill in your grief, but bestir yourself, lest you sink into blacker woe, and your bitterness become as wormwood and gall.

While inaction will lead into blank despair, I am certain that work distracts the mind from the sad point upon which it is apt to thrust itself. Nothing is healthier than having work to do. I have seen per-

sons of leisure give way most terribly in the case of the loss of children, while I have known laboring people, who, I believe have been as sensitive in heart, who have kept up bravely. Under God, I have attributed the difference to the fact that the poor woman must go to earn her daily bread, or must get about her domestic duties whatever happens, and the poor man must do his daily task, or else the family will be in need. Thus, toil has proved to be a blessed necessity by withdrawing the mind from the sorrow which would have engrossed it. You have heard of Alexander Cruden. Perhaps you do not know that he was crossed in love, and met with certain other trials which drove him nearly mad, and yet Alexander Cruden did not become insane, for he engaged upon the immense work of forming a concordance of sacred Scripture, which concordance has become the great instrument by which we search the Word of God. This work kept him from becoming altogether insane. If I had to prescribe to “a mind diseased,” I would say, “Enter upon good work and keep at it.” Dear friends, if you are in trouble and Satan tempts you to get alone, and to cease from the work of the Lord, resist the injurious suggestion. God the Holy Spirit is most likely to comfort you, and to apply the precious promises of His word to your soul, if you pursue your Master’s work with all your heart. Attend to His business, and He will attend to your business. Tell poor sinners about His wounds, and He will bind up yours. Forget your cross in His. Forget your griefs in the griefs of the sons of men who are perishing for lack of knowledge and you shall find the readiest way to consolation.

A valuable solace for sorrow is activity, especially, I think, in reference to *new* work. It will help you much if a new trouble suggests to you new service. Old work does not always take the mind off from its vexatious, for we are apt to do it mechanically, and as a matter of routine, but something altogether fresh will aid us sweetly to forget our trial. Oh, to strike out some new path! To invent new honors for Jesus, new enterprises for His kingdom, new attractions for His gospel—this will help to charm away our griefs. With many, the doing of any kind of service for Christ will be quite a novelty. I grieve to say it. These people are desponding. I am not so grieved at that, because if any man will not work, neither shall he eat. And if a Christian will not serve his Master, he shall not feast with the King’s worthies. Oh, how much of joy many of you miss by not doing more for the poor, more for the ignorant, more for Christ! The poet Rogers tells us—and he throws the story into poetry which I forget—of a rich man in Venice who was the subject of despair, and became such a hypochondriac that he went down to the canal to drown himself. But on the way he was met by a poor little boy who tugged at his coat and begged for bread. When the rich man called him an impostor, the boy besought him to come home with him, and see his father and mother who were dying of starvation. He went up into the room, and found the family literally perishing for lack of food. He laid out the money which he had in his pocket in making them all glad with a hearty meal, and then he said to himself that there was something worth living for after all. He had found a novel enjoyment, which gave a fresh motive for living. I would like to ask you who have suffered a great trouble whether the Lord may not be pressing you by this means, into a new path of delight, directing you to a fresh method of glorifying God and doing good to your fellow men. I will sing you a song if you will, as sorrowful as David’s lament, but I would rather teach you the use of the bow. I believe that I shall minister better to your comfort if I enlist you as soldiers in Christ’s army, and teach you to use His weapons, than if I should console you with the most plaintive minstrelsy of sadness.

Do I speak to any here present who endure great earthly afflictions, but know nothing of spiritual things? Is it not the case that God often brings His wandering children to Himself by distresses? The way in which you are to be comforted, dear friends, is not by going into the world again, and seeking further pleasures there. If God means to bless you, He may allow you to become so hungry that you may wish to fill your belly with the husks. You have spent your living riotously, and now you are ready to despair. Round by that dark corner of despair may be the way to your Father’s house. To expel your present temporal grief, you need a spiritual grief concerning sin. If you learn of Jesus at this hour to repent of sin, and to put your trust in Him, your soul will be awakened to say, “I will arise, and go unto my Father,” and then you will lose your hunger, and forget the swine trough. Where? Why, amidst the music and dancing of your Father’s house, and in the joy of hearing Him say, “Let us eat, and be merry, for this My son was dead, and is alive again, He was lost, and is found.”

Yes, David was right. The way to raise the people out of their despondency was to teach them the use of the bow, their own arrows would slay their grief, and the way to get you mourning ones out of

your sorrow is to teach you those holy activities which lead a soul to trust in Christ, and to find salvation at His feet.

That is the first lesson which, I think, the text most sweetly teaches.

II. A second lesson is that AN ADMIRABLE USE OF DISASTER IS TO LEARN ITS LESSONS. What was the disaster? Saul and Jonathan had been shot by archers. The Philistines were evidently strong in the use of the bow, but Saul's army was short of archers, and so they were not able to strike the Philistines at a distance. Before they came to close quarters, where Israel might have been a match for Philistia, the arrows of the Philistines had reached their king. Had they known how to use the bow, they might have been conquerors, and therefore David hastens to teach the men of Judah the use of the bow.

Beloved friends, I will suppose that you have met with failures. I refer to disasters peculiar to you. What shall you do? Sit down and fret and trouble yourselves, and give up in despair? God forbid. As the men of Judah learned the use of the bow, through their being beaten by the bow, so you gather wisdom from that which has befallen you. Have you been made to fly before your adversary? Then *find out where your weakness is*. Search and see. Is it a sin indulged? Is it some point where you ought to have been guarded, but where you have been unwatchful? Is it weakness in prayer? Is it neglect of the Word of God? Is it indifference to divine truth? Is it coldness of heart? Or what is it? If you have been defeated, there is a cause for it. If you have been cast down and brought low, say unto God, "Show me why You contend with me." Has the Lord a controversy with you? Be not content till you have got to the bottom of it, and found out the root that bears this gall and wormwood. Is not this the way of wisdom? May it not happen that the cause of the disaster is that God is not with you? What if nothing prospers with you? What if it is vain for you to rise up early, and sit up late, and eat the bread of carefulness, since the hand of God is against you? What if you are to have no pleasure in the things that once gave you satisfaction, because God has set you as a target for His arrows, and in wrath is shooting at you? It may be so. Or you may not be one of His children at all as yet, and He may be tossing you to and fro like a ball, that you may never find rest until you humbly come and cry to Christ, and seek mercy at His hands. Look and see whether it is so. It is of no use to worry about the disaster, search out the cause of it. Strive to learn the lesson which it is meant to teach you. Is there any secret sin with you?

Perhaps by looking at the defeat you may *learn the way to victory*. David judged that if they were defeated by the bow, they might yet win by the bow. It is right to learn from our adversaries. There is something to be learned from Satan. If he goes about, let us be diligent; if he seeks whom he may devour, let us seek whom we may save; and if he watches carefully to find out our weak points, let us watch those whom we would bless to find out how we may best reach their hearts. Many a man has grown rich through poverty, healthy through sickness, and holy by being made conscious of sin. When he has been struck down, then has he cried out to God, and God has lifted him up. Woe to that man who will not "hear the rod and Him that has appointed it."

I pray that you may diligently learn the lesson which every disaster would teach. May not a misfortune which happens to a church and to Christian people be to them *a call to action—to general action*? Saul had a little standing army, and did not drill the entire nation for war, but David says, "I will teach all my own tribe the use of the bow." Now, whenever a church begins to get low, dull, stupid—and many churches go in that direction—when everybody seems to be asleep, and the minister's sermon is a kind of sanctified snore, and all the worship is steeped in slumber, why, what is to be done? Then is the time to teach the children of Judah the use of the bow, and to wake them all up to holy enterprise. Say to them, "You must not allow a few to be doing the work of Christ, but all must do it. You must all be taught the use of the bow." It was the glory of the Moravians that all their members were missionaries, and such ought to be the glory of every church. Every man, woman, and child in the church should take part in the battle for Jesus. This, by God's grace, is the cure for spiritual decline; teach the people the use of the bow.

Let us learn lessons from defeat. Let us learn from the sin which has cast us down to cry unto God, the mighty One, to hold us up. If we are at this time under some great failure in life, let us learn greater care. If we have been permitted to err, let us learn to watch. Do not sullenly confess, "I have done wrong," but repent of it, and ask God for grace that you may be upheld in the future, like Peter, who was stronger after his fall than before it, and was set to strengthen his brethren. What is done cannot be undone, but we may so learn from it by God's teaching, that we may never do the same again. May God

grant that this may be the case. If it were proper, I could sing to you tonight a song of mourning over the disasters of a soul, or of a church, but I believe that I would not do you half as much good as by stirring you up to learn the use of the bow, that is to say, to rectify your errors, and supply your defects.

III. Now, thirdly, another lesson. A NOBLE MONUMENT TO A FRIEND IS TO IMITATE HIS EXCELLENCES. How does that come from the text? Why, thus. When Jonathan and David communed together, they fixed the meeting by Jonathan's shooting certain arrows. It is evident that Jonathan was a man, who greatly favored the use of the bow, and though his father did not largely introduce it into the army, yet Jonathan was well skilled therein. "Well then," says David, "in memory of Jonathan, instead of piling up a great monument, we will teach the children of Judah the use of the bow." Come, brethren, let this be your memorial to your dear father—if he was a child of God, be like him. If you want to keep in memory your beloved mother, exhibit in yourselves the virtues that shone in her. That sweet child of yours has gone to heaven, and can never be forgotten, and her likeness hangs over the mantelpiece. I mean that dear little child who sang of Jesus when she died. If you want to remember her beyond all forgetfulness, then love her Savior, and go where little Jane has gone. No memorial is more fit than imitation. Be yourself the monument, by exhibiting within yourself all that was good in the dear departed one.

How especially true is this in connection with our divine Lord! I see the Romanist continually putting up crosses by the roadside, and sometimes on these there are hideous representations of a person dying by crucifixion, and there are nails, and sponge, and spear, and I know not what. This arises out of a natural desire to perpetuate the memory of the crucified Redeemer, but you will do far better, dear brother, if you are, yourself, crucified with Christ, and if you exhibit in your own person that divine self-denial, that blessed love, that superlative holiness, which was found in Him. Some will build a church, and lavish money upon architecture. I shall not condemn them, for their splendid generosity may savor of the spirit of that woman who broke the alabaster box, and poured the ointment upon the Savior's feet. But I would suggest that to build up within one's self, by the power of God's Spirit, the Christ-like character is a better memorial than the best piece of architecture that can ever be put together. What if you should employ the greatest of sculptors, and he, with cunning hand, should mold the marble till it emulated life? Would not the monument mainly keep in mind the artist and rather make men think of the costliness of the work than of anything else? Whereas, if you become yourself, not in marble, but in living flesh, the image of Christ, then men will take notice of you that you have been with Jesus, and have learned of Him, and this will keep Him best in memory. If we do what Christ would have done under our circumstances, we shall be exhibiting a far better memorial of Him than wealth can possibly purchase. When David taught these people the use of the bow, every time they strung an arrow they might remember Jonathan, and whenever a regiment of archers went through the streets to the battle, they brought Jonathan before the public mind. David instituted this form of royal artillery on purpose that Jonathan might be kept in mind. And you, dear friends, every time you go forth to do the service of God, obediently and zealously, as Jesus did it, you put men in mind of Jesus, and they say, "God has set these men in the world to be witnesses for Christ, to keep His name alive in the earth. These men are a blessing because Jesus Himself has blessed them." I would thus stir you all up to endeavor all the days of your life so to live and serve God that the name of Jesus Christ shall be kept alive in this nation, and throughout the world.

IV. Lastly, and but for a moment, I think that the form which this military order took, to teach the children of Judah the use of the bow, may be allegorically applied tonight to you, dear friends. IT IS A GREAT ADVANTAGE TO BELIEVERS TO LEARN THE USE OF THE BOW SPIRITUALLY. First, there is *the bow of prayer*. Its use has not gone out of date, but I wish that all of us knew how to shoot the arrows of the Lord's deliverance much better than we do. Holy men of old would pick out an arrow, and when they had chosen it they knew how to use it. They knew what they needed, and they prayed for it. They fitted their arrow on the string, that is to say, they took God's promise, the promise that answered their desire and fitting the one to the other, and they took straight aim at heaven and watched the flight of the arrow petition. They knew to whom they were praying, as well as what they were praying for, and why they expected to be heard, and so they drew the bow of prayer with all their might. When the man of God went up to the top of Carmel, and there took his bow and drew it, there was no fear of his missing the mark, or if, perhaps, the arrow had not force enough, he would pull the

bow a second time, and a third time, and a fourth time, and a seventh time, till at last the arrow struck the mark. He would not come down from his watchtower till he knew that the arrow of his prayer was lodged in heaven. In all times of tribulation, what is needed is that the children of Judah should know the use of the bow of prayer.

When we heard of those fearful assassinations in Ireland, the news reached the bulk of us on the Sabbath day, and men of God went to their loopholes of retreat, and shot up to heaven prayers for poor Ireland. It was the best thing that could be done. I have more faith in prayer than in police and prisons. In any time of national need the men that save a nation are the men of prayer. What, not the wise statesmen? Certainly, wise statesmen, but who makes them wise? God has power over all minds, and in answer to the prayer from this pulpit, He can visit yonder mind in St. Stephen's. From a humble cottage in the western highlands there may go up to God a cry that shall come down upon the Prime Minister, and direct his thoughts. Remember what Queen Mary used to say when she wanted to bring popery back to Scotland. She said that she was more afraid of John Knox's prayers than of all the armies that the Scottish lords could get together. She was right for once. When men overlook prayer they overlook the greatest factor in human affairs. The mystic rod of God is in the hand of many a Moses still among us—a rod which brings victory to Israel, and defeat to Amalek. The strength of the church lies not in the oratory of the pulpit, but in the oratory of the closet. That church of God that shall do most for the world is the church that shall do most with God. He can rule men for God who is ruled by God for men. He that gives up his soul to God that God may write His will upon his life is the mighty man. The man who has had the will of God worked in him by the Holy Spirit, and can work it out into fervent prayer, is the man who, though princes and potentates know it not, sits nearer to the helm of affairs than they can reach. I could write you a plaintive hymn about the woes of Ireland, and about the sins of men and the evils of the times, but I had far rather teach you the use of the bow of prayer, for then, if you could send your longings up to the Lord, full many a blessing would come upon the land, and the adversaries of the Lord would be discomfited, and peaceful and happy days would dawn.

Perhaps I speak to some here who do not know anything about praying. I dare say that the brother is here who listened to a sermon on Peckham Rye, which was rather a wild one, I am afraid. In that discourse the preacher said to his entire congregation that if they would go home and ask God for anything the Lord would give it to them. I cannot endorse so wild a statement. However, this man thought that the preacher having said it, it was true, and having never prayed before in all his life, he put the question to the test of a certain event, and that certain event fell out as he desired. Then he began to tremble, for he judged that assuredly there is a God. Now, I do not say to you, dear hearers, that whatever all of you shall ask in prayer you shall receive. I would not say that to you ungodly ones. But I do say that if you will ask for mercy and salvation and eternal life, and anything that is promised to believing sinners, you shall have it. I wish you would try the experiment, for you would find that the Lord never breaks a promise. If you read a promise made to a sinner, it is made to you. Go and plead it, and the Lord will grant it. I will be surety for Him that He will keep His word. Trust Him and try, and thus learn the use of the bow.

God bless you for Christ's sake. Amen.

**PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—PSALM 66.
HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—84 (SONG 2), 66 (SONG 1), 749.**

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